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## MYSTIC PASSAGES IN THE PSALMS.

THE very title of this essay may seem sufficient to condemn it. An accurate definition of mysticism will, at any rate, be demanded from a writer who claims to find mystic passages in the Psalter. But an accurate definition of mysticism I am no more prepared to give than Professor Seth, who writing on this subject in the new edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, is fain to describe mysticism rather than to define it. Yet I fear that Professor Seth, like most other investigators, would not approve the introduction of the word "mystic" to qualify any possible fragment of the Old Testament Canon. Neither the Greek nor the Hebrew mind, he tells us, lent itself readily to mysticism: "The Greek, because of its clear and sunny naturalism; the Hebrew, because of its rigid monotheism and its turn towards worldly realism and statutory observance." I do not want to argue at length about what is in the main a matter of terminology. My reasons for applying the term "mystic" to certain select passages in the Psalms are, first, that I do not know of any other word which precisely describes those particular religious features which connect these passages together; secondly, that it would undoubtedly appear as if the essential ideas of mysticism are actually contained in them. That there is no mystical system in the Psalter, and that everything is still simple, naïve, and even tentative, will be abundantly evident in the sequel, but may properly be premised at starting. Mystical passages, I think, there are: mysticism, as a co-ordinated system, there is not.

The essential ideas of mysticism are, first, that without the need of intermediary or external connective, there can be and is a real communion between God and man: secondly, that this real communion is brought about by the active co-operation of both parts of the dual relationship; and thirdly, that man realizes the communion not through processes of reasoning, but directly and intuitively through feeling. If it be thought that these essential ideas lie at the root not merely of all true mysticism, but also of all true religion, the reply would be, that mysticism does comprise a certain aspect of religion, or, in other words, that religion, in that part of it

which deals with the relation of the individual soul to God, culminates in mysticism. Between religion and mysticism there must subsist a close and lasting connection, but for the aberrations and excrescences of mysticism, religion, as such, is in no wise responsible.<sup>1</sup>

Although mystics of various creeds have said hard things of the human understanding, it is obvious that the faculty by which we realize God is not dissociated from reason. If mysticism contains any truth at all, then must the God who is revealed in feeling, be one with the God who is demanded by reason. Mysticism is not necessarily irrational, but its sense of, and belief in, God are peculiar and distinct. The same religious doctrine can be looked at from a purely rational and also from a mystical point of view. The Deuteronomist commands the love of God, and the propriety of such a love to the assumed Author of goodness and life can be neatly proved by a fairly cogent process of deductive reasoning. The Psalmist needs no bidding and no argument to stimulate his love. He can but give back what he receives. "Thy love is better than life itself ; my lips shall praise thee."

Our very belief in God may have a variety of sources, and yet these sources need not be self-conflicting. Either metaphysical or moral arguments may lead to the conviction that there must exist an infinite and self-conscious Divine Being. I may have been taught as a child to believe that God is, and although I have never dwelt in thought or feeling upon this subject, I should always answer in the affirmative to the question whether I believed in his existence. So also I have been taught that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066, and wherever and whenever you questioned me as to my belief upon the date, I should always give you the same unvarying answer. But the mystic, the man who both begins and ends with God, does not believe in him as a metaphysical or moral necessity, nor, however much it may owe to them, is his belief the mere conventional outcome of education and environment. And the author of the Psalm from which I have just quoted, wrote as he did, because he had felt God,—had realised him in feeling.

If, in the general sense here indicated, there are mystical passages to be found anywhere within the range of the Old

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<sup>1</sup> The Germans are able to distinguish between mysticism as the inward core of religion, and mysticism as a one-sided system. The one is *Mystik*, the other *Mysticismus*. Cp. for the right usage of the two words Nitzsch's *System der Christlichen Lehre*, pp. 32-37. Nitzsch says, "Die innerliche Lebendigkeit der Religion ist allezeit *Mystik*." Cp. also Vaughan's *Hours with the Mystics*, 5th edition, vol. 1, p. 21.

Testament Canon, it is in the Psalms where they should especially be sought. For the doctrine of the direct communion with God will more naturally be dwelt upon or alluded to in the freer and more individualising portions of religious literature, where the speaker deals with his own experience and is concerned with his own spiritual needs and aspirations. And this is precisely the place which is filled by the Psalter in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Psalms occupy a unique position in that collection. They form a kind of touchstone to which we may bring the religion of Israel during some five centuries of its growth and test its value. For the worth of a religion lies in its effect upon the character of the individual, and the Psalms as the expression of inward religious sentiment reflect, as accurately as songs and prayers can, the result of external religious environment upon individual tendencies of feeling and disposition. In the legal and historical writings there is clearly no room for any display of "personal religion." The prophets believed themselves charged with a direct message from God, and their religious utterances, however coloured by peculiarities of individual character, deal with religion in its relation to society at large. The so-called Wisdom literature, which comprises the Books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, is reflective and didactic both in object and form; the tone and temper of the Wise Men are little calculated for the production of mysticism. But in the Psalter the field is ready. A large proportion of the Psalms are the fresh and free expression of the writer's own feelings at the moment of composition. There are no lyrical poems more instinct with spontaneity than the majority of the Psalms. They were not written to instruct others, but because the soul was full and overflowed in words.

The religion of the Psalter (and what is true of its religion in general is equally true as applied to its mystical passages) is sincere, vigorous and earnest; it is naïve, ingenuous and undogmatic; it is fresh, virile and unstereotyped. Who the authors of the Psalms were we can never know, but for the best of them this much at least is clear, that they were, on their own particular ground, great men of large experience; keen, eager, life-loving souls with strong feelings and even with strong passions, whose religion, if sometimes crude and cruel, is never morbid or unhealthy. These men were endowed with an intensity of religious sentiment which, in every age, is but the possession of a few, while for us its value is heightened because of its large measure of first hand originality. Their religious feelings did not naturally run into certain already existing and more or less conventional moulds;

the form as well as the thought is their own creation. Many of the Psalms are clearly due to small personal incidents, but yet, through the religious genius of the writers, the lyrics, that are the result of these petty local and temporary events, contain truths that are universal and everlasting. Hence it is that the Psalms have become for the individual worshipper, as well as for the community, the religious classic *par excellence*. They fulfil that condition which Rückert has said to be necessary for the transformation of the *Gelegenheits-Gedicht* into a poem for all "the Worlds and the Ages":—

Nur wenn es Ewiges im Zeitlichen enthält,  
Ist heut es für das Fest und morgen für die Welt.

Since the mysticism which deals with the direct communion of man with God can be fitly regarded as an element of religion itself,—either its consummation or its perversion, according to the particular point of view adopted—it is not strange that in compositions like the Psalms, where there is no conscious straining after mystical phraseology, it is not possible to draw a hard and fast line, distinguishing the passages which are generally religious or spiritual, from those which by the peculiarity of their thought and time, may be allocated by themselves into a separate mystical category. But this difficulty is common. Day and night are very different things, though it is hard to say when the day has ended and the night begun. And so, too, there are passages in the Psalms which this word "mystic" most fitly describes, although between them and others which are certainly not mystic at all, the gap is bridged over by steps of most delicate gradation. The mystic passages in question are not very numerous. Not all the Psalms are written upon the same high level of religious experience, while of many the scope and object preclude the possibility of mystical expressions. That fundamental axiom of all mysticism, "the direct, close and immediate relation of the soul of man to God," Dean Church, in his delightful lectures on the Sacred Poetry of Early Religions, has characterised as the "first element" of any more developed religious consciousness, and declared that it pervades every single Psalm, from the first to the last. Yet, however true this assertion may be, it is only in certain Psalms that this belief is developed into the doctrine of the direct communion. For that communion must not be considered included in the general assumption that man prays and God hears his prayer. Such a relationship is too cold and formal for the religious ardency of the noblest Psalms; the doctrine of the mystical communion is not reached till that communion is desired and regarded as an end in itself, that carries with it its own reward.

Such a teaching must obviously find its most appropriate place in those Psalms which possess an individualising character. There are, however, somewhat over eighty Psalms which are liturgical hymns—religious songs for the whole community, and in these the mystical element is naturally wanting. Of the remaining seventy, where, to all appearances, it is an individual who is pouring forth his prayer and aspiration, there are several in which many scholars hold that the speaker is a personification, representing the nation as a whole, or the pious kernel of the Jewish Community. Thus Professor Cheyne holds that in that apparently most intensely personal and individual Psalm, the fifty-first, the single speaker is only a personification for the chosen spirits among the Jewish people. Yet for our present purpose it is, I think, sufficiently safe to neglect the personification theory. For in any case the speaker, though he feel and speak as a member of a distinct religious community, and though he be conscious of representing the cause of God's chosen servants, is nevertheless telling us the results of his own spiritual life, and his words are the accurate transcript of what in his own individual soul he has realised in feeling. Identified as he is with the larger unity of which he forms a part, he has not chosen his words with studious and elaborate care to set forth the religious experiences of others; they are the fresh and faithful record of his own. His sense of God's nearness may, to some extent, be conditioned by the conviction that the true Israel is watched over by God with especial abundance of loving kindness. But still the fact remains that every word the Psalmist utters is the genuine outcome of his own feelings, which is thus both the source of his inspiration and the guarantee of its truth.

In what ways, then, do the Psalmists speak of the communion of man with God? It must again be insisted that no system of mysticism must be expected in the Psalter. All is youthful, simple and germinating. We must not look for more than isolated expressions scattered here and there, which later writers have developed and connected together into a systematic whole. Moreover, it is always to be remembered that not only is the date at which any particular Psalm was written very frequently doubtful, but that between the earliest and the latest Psalm there lies an interval of not less than 500 years. From the fragmentary utterances of authors so widely separated in time, it stands to reason that no connected religious system can be extracted. A particular thought which may be found in one Psalm, such for instance as that of the Holy Spirit, in the fifty-first, must certainly not be assumed as the common belief of the Psalmists as a whole. When we speak

of "the Psalmist" as teaching any special doctrine, we must always be understood to refer only to the particular writer or writers in which the special doctrine is to be found.

To appreciate the views of the several Psalmists upon the communion of man with God, it is necessary to notice carefully their manner of regarding God. We must enquire what aspects of the Divine nature especially appealed to them.

In the Psalter, as in every other portion of the Hebrew Scriptures, the fundamental quality of the Godhead is conceived as Righteousness. The righteous God reveals himself to the righteous. The passport into the kingdom of heaven must bear the warrant of morality. The next most important Divine quality for our present purpose is that of being a Deliverer and Saviour from trouble and distress. It is not unnatural that the Psalms which show the deepest craving after God, should be those in which the writer alludes to miseries and misfortunes which he has undergone or is still undergoing. The Psalmists were human beings like the rest of us; and in all ages it has been found that the sense of God's presence is quickened by the trials of sorrow. The Psalms are full of complaints against cruel persecution and ill treatment. We hear of reproach, scorn and slander; base ingratitude and treachery; open violence and plots against the life. The actual nature of these afflictions we can but guess: that, however, they were real and sharp there can be no doubt. They were long and vigorous enough to cause the Psalmist to feel with intensity of conviction that God alone could be their Saviour. And now we advance one step further. God is not merely conceived as a distant Being of enormous power, who will ultimately deliver the righteous from his unmerited sufferings, but he is also a protection and a solace in the very midst of trouble. The anticipation of rescue in the future induces the Psalmist to fix his hopes on God in the present; cherished for what he will effect in days to come, God becomes a source of strength and cheering for what he is, apart from what, as the righteous and active Judge, he will ultimately do. He is spoken of as a Shelter and a Refuge, a Retreat and an Asylum, a Rock, a Shield and a Stronghold. The metaphors imply that man may, as it were, betake himself to God and win *from* him protection, or again, that God is near enough to man for man to find *in* him his covert and retreat. The Psalmists who have this conviction of God's sheltering presence, rise superior in the very midst of trouble to the attacks of their foes. God is not called a refuge conventionally: what the Psalmist says he feels: through prayerful effort and spiritual insight the strength of a great

faith is given him. A common grammatical peculiarity enables us to watch the growth of this faith in its making. I allude to the so-called perfect of confidence, which in the Psalms occupies a precisely analogous position to the predictive perfect in the prophets. Thus we frequently come across Psalms where the anguished cry for help of the opening is turned towards the close into a pæan of triumph. A Psalmist will begin his poem by a prayer for God's deliverance, and end it by blessing God that he has answered him. The deliverance is twofold. There is, primarily, the anticipation of real external rescue, which anticipation has been so strengthened by prayer as to amount to positive conviction. But, secondly, to account fully for the language employed, we must assume another deliverance than this, more inward and spiritual. The "burden" of danger has been "cast" upon God, and within the erewhile straitened spirit of the Psalmist have come enlargement and peace.

Prayer that has results like these is not far from the mystic's communion. But God is even more to some Psalmists than a refuge and a stronghold. There are a few more metaphors to be passed in review, which lead us nearer still to mystical conceptions. God is the Rock of the Heart, the Portion of the Cup: he is Shepherd and Light: the Fountain of Life: an exceeding Joy. Some of the passages in which these expressions occur, must be considered in comparative detail. They will shew that God is not merely desired as a deliverer from trouble, or as the gracious helper towards the moral life,—not merely therefore for what he does and will do, but also for what he is. Apart from all results and apart from any surrounding circumstance, God is realised as the supremest good that men can enjoy. Such a sense of God as an end in himself is the very kernel of mysticism. It is the consummation of communion with God, or, from another point of view, it is that communion itself, accomplished and fulfilled.

The Psalms which speak fully and clearly after this mystical fashion are few in number. But a patient student of the Psalter will tend to the conclusion that these few Psalms are only the full-voiced expression of a more widely diffused sentiment. In many Psalms besides these select few we breathe an atmosphere of religious joy, that is caused by a vivid belief in the constant activity of the Divine faithfulness and love. The exhortation to "rejoice in the Lord" is continually repeated. But for our present purpose it will be sufficient to confine our attention to three Psalms, where the highest plane of religious or mystic beatitude has been attained. Of these



the first is the 16th. If that Psalm was written under any stress of immediate danger, the joyful sense of communion with God has dissipated nearly every trace of it. It opens with a brief petition to God for his protection. The singer has made God his refuge; so may God continue to watch over him. God is his Master; beside God he has no other happiness or welfare. Then after a short side-glance at those who are apostates from the true Deity, he continues: "Jehovah, the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: Thou maintainest my lot." These metaphors signify that God is his supremest good and his highest satisfaction. Hupfeld has rightly pointed out that to the general idea of property or possession which is contained in the words, "portion of mine inheritance," the additional attribute, "portion of my cup," is added, to indicate that the Psalmist's greatest good is also his greatest happiness. God is not only the *summum bonum* of his intelligence; he is also the *summa lætitia* of his feeling. Since he has been able to realise God thus powerfully, he may truly declare, "My lines have fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a delightsome heritage." And the Psalm is brought to a conclusion with a rapturous exclamation, in which the present bliss of his divine communion gives place to the joyous assurance of a still more glorious future: "Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; in thy presence is fulness of joy; all pleasant things are in thy right hand for ever." "In thy presence is fulness of joys;" in other words, the vision of God is the highest spiritual felicity. "The upright shall behold God's countenance;" this privilege, as in the sixth Beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount, is the reward of the pure in heart.<sup>1</sup>

The 63rd Psalm was written at a distance from the temple, and the singer has to discover that God is near him, even though his sanctuary be far. The yearning for communion with the Highest has seldom been expressed in words more intense and ardent than those with which the Psalm opens: "O God, thou art my God; earnestly do I seek thee; my soul thirsts for thee; my flesh pines for thee, (as) in a dry and fainting land where no water is." Would that such a revelation of God were in this distant land now vouchsafed to him, as erewhile he had been granted in the temple! But the very longing for God appears to bring with it its own reward. "Severed as he is from the material temple, his heart has become a temple of praise;" and therefore we get a sudden transition from "melancholy to ecstatic joy."<sup>2</sup> "Thy

<sup>1</sup> Psalm xvii. 15 with Cheyne and Hupfeld's notes.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Professor Cheyne's note.

loving-kindness," he exclaims, "is better than life itself; my lips shall praise thee. Thus will I bless thee while I live, and lift up my hands in thy name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and with mirthful lips shall my mouth sing praise. For thou hast been my help, and in the shadow of thy wings I will shout for joy." Such a keen and joyful sense of God's presence is inadequately characterised by any word that stops short of "mystic." The Psalmist, as Professor Cheyne has pointed out, can only write as he does because his longing has been satisfied, and the object of his search found "in his heart's temple, in mystic union with the God of Love."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the highest degree of mysticism is reached in the 73rd Psalm. Here the Psalmist, from the calm, spiritual certitude which he has now reached after effort and storm, looks back upon the doubts and troubles that he has left behind him. His religious difficulties had been caused by the "welfare of the ungodly;" when he saw how they "have nothing to torment them; sound and stalwart is their strength." The theodicy to which his musing in God's sanctuary inclines him is not original. He still clings to the usual belief of the Old Testament writers, that the divine justice will, even in this world, be meted out to the righteous and the evildoer. But the close of the Psalm touches a loftier and more original note. He describes his own glorious lot which, in doubt's despite and through the graciousness of God, he has been enabled to gain. That lot is one of abiding nearness to God. "I am continually with thee. Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and possessing thee I have pleasure in nothing upon earth. Though my flesh and my heart should have wasted away"—that is to say, even under afflictions the most terrible—"God would be the rock of my heart, and my portion for ever."

From the passages cited out of these three Psalms, it is clear that communion with God, as an end in itself, was a happiness of which the Psalmists were not ignorant. No theory of this communion can be elicited from these isolated extracts; nor, indeed, would any attempt at a theoretical or systematic theological doctrine have been intelligible to the Psalmists. But so far as God's part in the relationship is concerned, the following observations seem legitimate deductions from the actual words of the Psalms themselves.

The God to whom it is sought to draw near is a living God.

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<sup>1</sup> See Professor Cheyne's edition of the Psalms in the *Parchment Library*, from which most of the translations have been borrowed.

The condition of communion depends upon the unfettered activity of God's love; and this love is vouchsafed to man in precise correspondence with man's own measure of love to God. "With the loving thou shewest thyself loving" (xviii. 26). How far this reciprocity is consonant with such philosophic conceptions of God as shape or limit the belief of many of us to-day, is a wholly different matter. To the Psalmists, man can only reach God because God—to use their favourite figure—stretches out to him a helping hand. "My soul," exclaims the 63rd Psalmist, "clings fast after thee: thy right hand upholds me." So again in the 73rd Psalm, because God has taken hold of his right hand, therefore is the singer continually with God. Another Psalmist asks for God's light and truth to guide him to God's dwelling-place. One great poet teacher knew that man's capacity for God is due to God's Spirit which is in man: "Cast me not away," was his prayer, "from thy presence; take not thy Holy Spirit from me." And another sums up his religious position in the famous words: "With Thee is the fountain of life; through Thy light do we see light."

How does man find God? Through what inward or outward medium does he commune with him? Here again we can discover nothing more than isolated data. There is nothing systematic. The ethical basis of the communion has been already noticed. The Psalmists knew absolutely nothing of any ecstatic condition or privileged order which can dispense with the moral law. To them, righteousness in action and truthfulness of heart are indispensable preliminaries towards the approach to God. Whatever traces of mysticism there may be discernible in the Psalter, they are wholly free from the slightest antinomian taint.

Another more negative point is worthy of notice. The moral life appears to be the only condition for the religious life. Conformably with the true spirit of mysticism, our Psalmists lay no value on external rites and observances. No ascetic formulæ or devotional exercises are needed for communion with God. Nor is its satisfaction reserved for those who are versed in a sacred lore; there is no knowledge test that bars the way before the courts of God. The Psalmist, who has stilled and quieted his soul by drawing close beneath the everlasting arms of God, as the child is quieted and stilled within the arms of its mother, is precisely he who "has not been conversant with great matters, or with things too high for him."

One external medium, however, there undoubtedly is, and it must be dealt with at some length, because it affords a

most interesting example of the gradual transition from the material to the spiritual. Through its consideration, we shall also be made acquainted with fresh illustrations of our own subject, and be enabled to watch the growth of one important mystical conception from quite unmystical beginnings.

Even casual readers of the Psalms will readily call to mind the numerous references to the sanctuary of Jerusalem. These passages are one link in the chain of arguments by which Professor Graetz seeks to establish his interesting theory that the very large majority of the Psalms were written by Levites, who form a considerable portion of the suffering and down-trodden class that are known under the cognate terms of the Anawim and the Aniim, the Meek and the Afflicted. Into the value of Graetz's theory this is not the place to enter. It is, however, certain that the authors of many Psalms, including several containing mystical passages, were filled with an altogether overwhelming devotion and love for the temple of Jerusalem. They did believe that God was in the temple, as he was not elsewhere upon earth; here, in some peculiar but real sense, was his earthly dwelling-place, where the righteous worshipper might draw nigh to him. In the temple some Psalmists felt themselves most near to God, and felt God most near to them, just as there are people who find prayer, the attempted communing with God, more easy in church or synagogue than in their own homes. But in the very Psalms where this limitation upon God's universal presence is expressed, it is also frequently transcended. The Lord's house seems to receive a kind of double meaning; the one local and material, the other spiritual and mystic. On the one hand it is the actual and visible temple of stone that stood upon the hill of Zion; but on the other hand, it is also that larger and invisible house of God, wherein the righteous, be they near Jerusalem or far from it, may find a home. Such a conception as this may properly be called mystic.

It is indubitably a very dangerous method of exegesis to attribute a double sense, one narrower and one larger, to the same words. Is it not an anachronistic return to an exploded system of interpretation, by which the words of any given text can be made to bear any and every signification the expounder may choose? But, nevertheless, there seems to be no other method of interpretation which in these particular passages will suit the context. The hard and fast retention of a purely local and material view, with Hitzig, Graetz and other scholars, appears hopelessly inadequate to meet the necessities of the case. Rigorous consistency and a precise

and exact phraseology are not to be expected in the Psalms. The man of religious feeling is likely to interpret them better than the man of logic. It is one of the many merits of Hupfeld's Commentary, to have so clearly pointed out the manner and the degree of this fusion between the particular and the universal. The first example of it, and in its simplest form, occurs in the fifth Psalm. Here the writer prays to God for guidance and help. Conscious as he is of the purity of his own heart, he confidently claims the favour of a righteous God. "For thou art not a God," he exclaims, "who has pleasure in wickedness; evil cannot be a guest of thine; boasters cannot stand up before thine eyes." Evil cannot be the guest of God. The Hebrew word here employed indicates the relationship between suppliant or stranger and the protecting host. When the Psalmist declares that "evil cannot be God's guest," he implies that the wicked are shut out from communion with him. It is obviously not the actual entry into the temple from which the wicked are excluded. It was a very mixed assemblage, as we know from the prophetic homilies, which entered the temple's courts and sacrificed upon its altars. But the Psalmist, after he has asserted the exclusion of the wicked from the Divine friendship, claims this spiritual privilege for himself: "But I, because of thine abundant lovingkindness, can enter thy house, can worship in the fear of thee towards thy holy palace." If the house of God be rigidly restricted in its denotation to the temple, what is the truth or adequacy of the contrast? The idea of the temple is present to his mind, for the Psalmist still believes that the sanctuary is in a peculiar and special sense the dwelling-place of God. But the mere expression of satisfaction that the temple's gates are opened for him, is enlarged in a twofold direction. For while, on the one hand, the house of God is partially identified with the temple, its sovereign virtue consists in being the local medium for the blessedness of Divine communion. To the wicked that aspect of the temple is unknown. Standing on the same spot as the righteous, they were yet as much excluded from the Divine presence as if they had never trod the sacred courts. For them the temple is a mere pile of stones like any other building; to the righteous in a real, though mystic, sense it is filled with the presence and glory of God. If we may expand the short but pregnant words of our Psalmist in this direction, other parallel passages will show that Hupfeld is justified in expanding them in another. The House of God is tending to become disconnected with the temple of Zion; to enter it—the gift of God's grace—is receiving a meta-

phorical meaning equivalent to that vision of God's countenance which is spoken of in the 11th Psalm. Either phrase refers to communion. In the 15th Psalm this sense is fairly clear. "Who shall be a guest in thy tent, who shall dwell upon thy holy mountain?" So the Psalm opens. Then follows a string of ethical conditions upon which the entrance into the tent depends. How painfully the lofty universality of the Psalm is degraded if, with Professor Graetz, we assume that the Psalm merely depicts the character of those who should minister in the temple. The guests in God's tent need not be confined to the priest or the Levite. The covering of that tent is world wide. In the 23rd Psalm we have a portraiture of happy fellowship with God. A variety of metaphors is used to express the sense of security, sufficiency, and refreshment which the abiding sense of God's presence has given and still will give. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. . . He refreshes my soul; he leads me in the right paths for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through a valley of thick darkness, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me: thy club and thy staff they comfort me. . . Thou hast anointed my head with oil, my cup runs over." Then the Psalmist ends his song with an expression of his conviction that God will be near him always. "Surely good fortune and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the Lord's house for length of days." Does he mean that his visits to the temple will be frequent and uninterrupted? O, lame and impotent conclusion! But if the ardour of his enthusiasm has let him conceive the image of a larger house, not made with hands, of which the temple is the earthly symbol, then the thought of that constant divine communion which the perpetual outflow of God's love, as the necessary link between God and man, will enable him to enjoy, forms a fitting close and climax to the whole Psalm.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> With Psalm xv. should be compared xxiv. 1-6, which is in its origin unconnected with 7-10. The "mountain of the Lord" in verse 3 has a wider reference than the "ancient doors" of verse 7. Compare also lxi. 5; xxvi. 6, 8; xlii. 3 (where Hengstenberg's note is still suggestive); xliii. 4; lxxv. 5; lii. 10; xcii. 14; and lxxxiv. for various degrees of literal and spiritual usage of the temple and kindred expressions. On the whole subject Delitzsch's note on Psalm xv. 1 should also be read. The main metaphor, as Hengstenberg on xv. 1 has pointed out, runs on into the New Testament. Cp. the noble passage in the Epistle to the Ephesians ii. 19-22, and also 1 Timothy iii. 15. Clauss's Commentary on Psalm xv., in his now antiquated "*Beiträge zur Kritik und Exegese der Psalmen*" (Berlin 1831) is worth reading. [Since the above was written, Professor Cheyne's larger edition of the Psalms has appeared. His notes on the various passages should be carefully compared throughout. I am glad to find that his view seems very much the same as that advocated in this article.]

Two other passages, one in the 27th and one in the 36th Psalm, will also serve to illustrate this portion of our subject. The 27th Psalm opens with solemn but joyful asseverations of the all-sufficiency of God. The Lord is the Psalmist's light and salvation; whom has he to fear? The Lord is the fortress of his life, at whom has he to tremble? Then in the 4th verse there is a transition to prayer: "One thing have I asked of the Lord—that is my desire; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life; to gaze upon the pleasantness of the Lord, and to contemplate his palace. For he treasures me in his bower in the day of trouble; He covers me in the covert of his tent; upon a rock does he exalt me." What is meant by this gazing upon the pleasantness of God? To gaze upon a thing in Hebrew usage (cp. iv. 7, xvi. 10) may be equivalent to experiencing it. This experience is surely very inadequately defined, if it be limited to the happy contemplation of the Temple's magnificence and the splendour of its ritual. The "bower" in which the Psalmist is "treasured" by God "in the day of trouble" is obviously metaphorical, and so, to some extent at least, is the "house of the Lord" in the previous verse. The bliss of gazing upon God's pleasantness must relate to that inward vision of God which may have been called up and suggested by the temple services, but was assuredly not their synonym or equivalent.<sup>1</sup>

The 36th Psalm, after four verses dealing with the wicked and their evil machinations, turns abruptly into a pure lyric outburst of admiration for the infinite goodness of God. It is one of the noblest and also one of the most mystic passages in the whole Psalter. Delitzsch, contrasting with it the language of the earlier verses, observes: "The poet, after having cast a glance into the chaos of evil, now moves in the happy depths of holy mysticism; the more obscure his language before, the more crystalline is its clearness now." And here, moreover, the local limitation of the house of God is entirely transcended. It simply signifies what Delitzsch calls his "Gnadenbereich," the wide empire of his grace. "How precious is thy lovingkindness, O God, that the children of men can take refuge under the shadow of thy wings! They feast upon the fatness of thy house; and of the river of thy pleasures dost thou give them their drink. For with thee is the fountain of life, by thy light do we see light."<sup>2</sup>

It is Delitzsch again who gives the best commentary

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Cheyne's interesting notes upon xxvii. 4, and lxiii. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. Psalms xxx. 20, 21; lxxv. 5.

upon this string of mystical metaphors; although showing something of his favourite tendency to indulge in an excess of unction, he brings out with force and fervour the full meaning of the Psalmist's words. I therefore here transcribe the greater portion of his commentary unabridged:—

“‘Fatness’ means the abundance of the gifts and blessings with which God entertains his people, and ‘feasting’ is the spiritual joy of the soul in the profound experience of the grace of God: the liberal fare of the priests from Jehovah’s table and the festive joy of the thank offerings—these external rites here receive a deeper spiritual meaning and an ideal generalisation. It is a stream of bliss wherewith God irrigates and fertilizes the soul, an outpouring of the joys of Paradise. And just as the four branches of the river of Paradise had a common source, so this stream has its source in God—nay, its source is God. He is the fountain of life; all existence flows from him who is pure being and blessedness. The more closely we are united to him the fuller the draughts of life which we draw from him who is the spring of life.”

“Through thy light we see light:” Of this concluding image Hupfield gives an adequate, though a simpler, explanation. “The light which streams from off the countenance of God is the source of all human light and life: in other words God’s grace is the source of all our welfare; only in God and through God can we find life and bliss; apart from him there is nothing but misery and death.”<sup>1</sup>

The foregoing quotations will, I think, go far to justify the appellation “mystic” for certain passages in the Psalter. A blissful communion or fellowship with God is an idea familiar to such writers as the authors of the 16th, the 36th, and the 73rd Psalms. They had experienced it themselves, and their words are the unexaggerated expression of their own feelings. It is true that Professor R. Smith, in his article on the 16th Psalm (“Expositor,” vol. iv. p. 341) declares that “the enjoyment of fellowship of God spoken of in the Bible is never mystical, but always moral.” But in the sense assigned to it in this essay there is no necessary opposition between the mystical and the moral. Without reason—which is merely the philosophical name for the divine spirit—the inward experience of God is not attainable. But by reason alone it can neither be proved nor realized. It is feeling which leads up to, and which tells of, this Divine communion, and hence, both because of its divine object and of the mysterious nature

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<sup>1</sup> See “Hupfeld’s Commentary,” *ad loc.* in either the first or second editions. In the third edition, by Nowack, just published, Hupfeld’s own explanations are frequently changed or omitted.



of the faculty by which we reach and become conscious of it, the communion may be justly qualified as mystic. By its etymology the word "mystic" is connected with the knowledge of the higher and unseen world, while by its popular usage an element of mystery enters into it. There seems therefore no other word which may so fitly describe the nature of that communion with God, which was realised by the Psalmists.

It may have seemed a great omission that no reference has hitherto been made to one question relating to that communion which possesses for us a superlative interest. Do the Psalmists know anything of a communion with God beyond the grave? No notice has been taken of this question because, strange as it may seem, it is, as regards the mysticism of the Psalms, of quite subordinate importance. Of the Psalms which contain any mystical passages in the sense defined, only the 16th, the 17th, the 49th, and the 73rd can be even construed as alluding to a future life. Now whether the authors of these Psalms did or did not believe in a life of blissful communion with God beyond the grave, they certainly did not believe that this communion only began in another world. The righteous may draw near to God upon earth, and taste these spiritual delights of communion while the mortal coil is still upon them. Nor if these four Psalmists, advancing beyond and above the general notions of their fellows, rose to the idea of spiritual immortality, did they conceive the future heavenly communion as different in kind from its earthly beginning. The largest possible signification that can be given to their words is that in the vivid and intense reality of their present life with God, the idea of death is blotted out and forgotten. Delitzsch, with his accustomed delicacy of theological distinction, has accurately expressed the difference between the Psalmist's ignoring of death and the more modern belief in immortality. "It is not that the grave is burst open by the prospect of heaven, but rather that in the intensity of life in God, the grave altogether disappears, for life in contrast to death is nothing but the thread of our earthly existence prolonged into infinity."<sup>1</sup>

Since, therefore, the bliss of any future life, which the four Psalmists may have conceived, was neither supposed to differ in kind, nor scarcely (so far as we can gather from their words) in degree, from the highest bliss that our earthly mortality does not forbid us to enjoy before we die, it is unnecessary to enter upon the detailed examination of the few disputed verses upon which a decision on the main ques-

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<sup>1</sup> Delitzsch, in Herzog-Plitt's *Encyklopädie*. "Psalmen" Art.

tion depends. Deeply interesting as that question is, it is yet not germane to our immediate subject. Whatever the ultimate judgment upon it may be, the mysticism of the Psalter is unaffected. Whether the Psalmists believed in a future world or not, the nature and value of their conception of the Divine communion remains the same.

Of that conception, now that the principal passages which illustrate it have been passed in review, it only remains to estimate the value. The quantity of the material at our command is but limited; its quality, however, is indisputably high. In the first place our Psalmists clearly recognised that the religious life is expressed in the affections. It is feeling, and not understanding, which gives vitality to religion. Such technical contrasts would have been unintelligible to them, but the fact as such, is none the less true. "Where, except in the Psalms," exclaims the Dean of St. Paul's, "did ancient religion think of placing the blessedness of man, whether in this life or beyond it, not in the outward good things which we know on earth, not in knowledge, not in power, but in the exercise of the affections?"

In the Psalms, again, the communion with God is closely restricted to the righteous. It is, moreover, connected inseparably with the moral life. Professor R. Smith says, quite correctly, "The Psalmist enjoys God as his portion, not in a sentimental ecstasy, which has nothing in common with daily life, but in the realization of Jehovah's constant presence with him as his counsellor in his duty and walk in the world." (Expositor, p. 350.)

Sharply drawn as the contrast between the good and the bad undoubtedly is, and over-confident as the conviction of personal righteousness in some Psalms may appear to us, it was nevertheless of the last importance that poet as well as prophet, lawgiver and proverb-maker should all proclaim the stern and rigorous alliance of morality with religion.

The mystic passages of the Psalter are also free from the Pantheistic tendencies of later mysticism, which sometimes inclines to make a confusion between the two poles of the spiritual communion. It is true that there was room for relating the doctrine of the 51st Psalm to the mystic idea. That the Holy Spirit in man is the link whereby the communion between Creator and creature is possible, is not adequately recognised except in that one great Psalm of penitence and contrition. Again, the doctrine of the universality of God so magnificently taught in the 139th Psalm—the pearl of the whole Psalter, according to Aben Ezra—is, as we have seen in considering the conception of the "House

of God," elsewhere only tentatively making its way. But these deficiencies are atoned for by the Psalmists' unfaltering belief in the actuality of the divine goodness. On the one side, man, free to sin and free to rise; on the other side, God, the fount of life, in whose light we see light. Such a belief presented no similar intellectual difficulties to the Psalmist as to ourselves; he was not disturbed by philosophical perplexities in marking off the finite separate volitions from the Infinite self-consciousness. But if for nine-tenths of us religion must stand or fall with theism, we must demand from all mystic poetry that is to be of permanent help to us, a complete assurance that the two elements of the mystic relationship shall be held apart, and each endowed with its own separate self-consciousness. There must be no juggling with words; it is not with his own spirit, or with his better self, or with the God within him, that the religionist seeks communion. Though the God within him may reveal the living God without, the former is in no sense an equivalent for the latter. He will only yearn for God, if he may still believe that the voice of a living God, that is not himself, is calling him to the light.

The Psalmists' mysticism has this other essential feature: it does not make the communion with God dependent upon knowledge. It is the "pure in heart," and not the "wise of head," who shall see God. The training necessary to secure that vision is only a training in well-doing. There is, then, nothing exclusive about the Psalmists' doctrine, and no laborious acquisition of theological or legal technicalities is regarded as necessary for the drawing near to God. It is from the Psalms that modern Jews may gather a needed corrective to that Rabbinical glorification of "knowledge" which has tempted some of their contemporary teachers to regard proficiency in scholastic learning as synonymous with proficiency in religion.

The joyful character of the Psalmists' doctrine of communion should also be noted. Trouble is forgotten; death is ignored; the Psalmist is only conscious of complete security and of unalloyed bliss. There is no reason to suppose that this feeling of happiness was enervating in its results, or that the Psalmist was less fitted for life's struggles upon the field of morality, after his communion with God, than before it. The very contrary is nearer the truth. "Trust in the Lord," says the 37th Psalm, "and do that which is good; inhabit the land, and cherish faithfulness. *Then wilt thou find thy delight in the Lord, and he shall grant thee thy heart's desires.*" Though one Psalmist declares God's love to be better

than life, and another that with God as his possession he has no other pleasure upon earth, we may not interpret these extreme exclamations of spiritual rapture to imply a withdrawal from a life of moral action to one of religious contemplation. That heightened sense of being, and that sure and blissful sense of God's presence, which the religion of the Psalmists had secured for them, will have been put to moral uses. When mysticism turns its back upon morality and life, it ceases to be in harmony with the mysticism of the Psalms.

Thus, both positively and negatively, we are, I think, justified in the high value that has been set upon those few consummate passages of the Psalter, wherein the general religious tendency of the whole book has found its purest and most spiritual expression. It has not been claimed for the Psalms that they represent the *ne plus ultra* of religious aspiration. We have already seen that there was work for later mysticism to do in the proper combining of the doctrines of the 51st and 139th Psalms—the doctrine of God's Spirit in man, and of the divine omnipresence—with the mystical teaching of such Psalms as the 16th and 73rd. Again, the joy of the divine communion was capable of fuller explanation upon the theory, virtually comprised in the 51st Psalm, of man's dual nature—of sin and reconciliation. And lastly, when the belief in the immortality of the soul had been fully attained, it is obvious how vastly enlarged were the spiritual data from which any mystical teaching might make its start. Yet these very deficiencies of the Psalter constitute, to some extent, its vigour and its charm. Some of the dangers from which they have preserved it have been already indicated. One other point may be mentioned in conclusion. The concentration of interest upon this earthly life enabled the Psalmists to see that the sense of God's presence and the joy of his communion were, even on earth, within man's grasp. If we, with that fuller sense of the world's problem, which larger experience and widened thought have given us, cannot believe in God's goodness or even in God Himself, without also believing in another life, we must not shut our eyes to the grandeur of that old Hebrew faith which, confronted with sorrow and evil, could yet maintain the vigour and the joyousness of its trust in God's righteousness and love. Here again has Delitzsch spoken wisely:—

“This is just the heroic feature in the faith of the Old Testament, that, in the midst of the riddles of this life, and face to face with the impenetrable darkness resting on the life beyond, it throws itself without reserve into the arms of God.”

C. G. MONTEFIORE.